

CLAIMS

1. In a computer network that includes at least two computers communicatively coupled to each other, a system for sharing knowledge objects among the registered users of the computer network comprising:

5 a means for maintaining and updating a collection of local or private knowledge objects managed by users, wherein each individual user can access any of the private knowledge objects directly; and

 a means for maintaining and updating a collection of published knowledge objects contributed by the users, wherein any of the users can access any of the
10 published knowledge objects by entering a unique user identification; and

 a means for maintaining and updating a collection of listed knowledge objects contributed by the users, wherein any of the listed knowledge objects can be identified but cannot be accessed by any of the users other than the user who contributed the listed knowledge object unless the user who contributed the listed
15 knowledge object authorizes the proposed access.

2. The system of Claim 1, further comprising:

 a means for changing a local or private knowledge object into a listed knowledge object, wherein said private knowledge object can be neither identified nor accessed by any of the users other than the user who possesses
20 the private knowledge object; and

 a means for publishing a private knowledge object or a listed knowledge object as a published, directly accessible knowledge object.

3. The system of Claim 2, further comprising a means for tracking any of:

the number of times a user discloses a private knowledge object as a listed knowledge object;

5 the number of times a user authorizes other users' access to a listed knowledge object;

the number of times a user publishes knowledge objects;

the number of times a published knowledge object is utilized by the users other than the user who contributed the published knowledge object; and

10 the number of times a user utilizes knowledge objects originating from other users;

wherein said numbers are used in determining a reward to the user for the user's involvement in knowledge sharing.

4. The system of Claim 1, wherein a user searches for a knowledge object by any of:

15 entering a query; and

navigating one or more directories.

5. In a computer network that includes at least two computers communicatively coupled to each other, a method for sharing knowledge objects among the registered users of the computer network, the method comprising the steps of:

20 maintaining and updating a collection of local or private knowledge objects managed by users, wherein each individual user can access any of the private knowledge objects directly; and

maintaining and updating a collection of published knowledge objects contributed by the users, wherein any of the users can access any of the published knowledge objects by entering a unique user identification; and

5 maintaining and updating a collection of listed knowledge objects contributed by the users, wherein any of the listed knowledge objects can be identified but cannot be accessed by any of the users other than the user who contributed the listed knowledge object unless the user who contributed the listed knowledge object authorizes the proposed access.

6. The method of Claim 5, further comprising the steps of:

10 changing a private knowledge object into a listed knowledge object, wherein said private knowledge object can be neither identified nor accessed by any of the users other than the user who possesses the private knowledge object; and

15 publishing a private knowledge object or a listed knowledge object as a published knowledge object.

7. The method of Claim 6, further comprising any step of:

tracking the number of times a user discloses a private knowledge object as a listed knowledge object;

20 tracking the number of times a user authorizes other users' access to a listed knowledge object;

tracking the number of times a user publishes knowledge objects;

tracking the number of times a published knowledge object is utilized by the users other than the user who contributed the published knowledge object; and

5 tracking the number of times a user utilizes knowledge objects originating from other users;

wherein said numbers are used in determining a reward to the user for the user's involvement in knowledge sharing.

8. The method of Claim 5, wherein a user searches for a knowledge object by any of:

10 entering a query; and

navigating one or more directories.

9. In a computer network that includes at least two computers communicatively coupled to each other, a process performed by the computers comprising the steps of:

5 (a) accepting a first user's request;

(b) searching a local or private knowledge object repository, each of the private knowledge objects being associated with a specific user;

(c) searching a central knowledge object repository and all contributed knowledge objects, each of the contributed knowledge objects being associated
0 with a specific user;

(d) returning to the first user a list of links for all matching knowledge objects, said matching knowledge objects being marked either local or published or listed;

5 (e) allowing access if the first user chooses a local or published knowledge object from the list; and

(f) forwarding the first user's request to a second user and prompting the second user for authorization of access if the first user chooses a listed knowledge object from the list, the second user having control of access to the listed knowledge object.

10 10. The process of Claim 9, wherein the first user initiates a request by any of:

entering a query; and

clicking a link in a directory.

11. The process of Claim 9, wherein the second user has the option to be either anonymous or identifiable.

15 12. The process of Claim 9, wherein the step (e) further comprises the step of: prompting the first user to enter a correct user identification.

13. The process of Claim 9, wherein the step (f) further comprises the step of:

20 requiring a sufficiently specific query so that a request cannot be forwarded to the second user until the search request is sufficiently specific so that it yields a finite, manageable set of results.

14. The process of Claim 9, after the step (f), further comprising the step of:

(g) returning to the first user the chosen listed knowledge object if the second user allows access;

(h) notifying the first user that the request is not completed if the second user declines access to the listed knowledge object.

5 15. The process of Claim 14, wherein the step (g) further comprises the step of:

prompting the second user to add a message for the first user.

16. The process of Claim 14, wherein the step (g) further comprises the step of:

prompting the second user to publish the chosen listed knowledge object.

17. The process of Claim 9, wherein the step (f) further comprises the step of:

10 prompting the second user to provide a substitution if the second user determines that the chosen listed knowledge object is irrelevant or sub optimal for the task indicated in the first user's request.

18. The process of Claim 17, further comprising any step of:

15 returning to the first user a private knowledge object from the second user's private domain if the second user so decides; and

prompting the second user to mark the private knowledge object as published.

19. The process of Claim 18, further comprising any step of:

20 tracking the number of times a user discloses a private knowledge object as a listed knowledge object;

tracking the number of times a user authorizes other users' access to a listed knowledge object;

tracking the number of times a user publishes knowledge objects;

5 tracking the number of times a published knowledge object is utilized by the users other than the user who contributed the published knowledge object; and

tracking the number of times a user utilizes knowledge objects originating from other users;

10 wherein said numbers are used in determining a reward to the user for the user's involvement in knowledge sharing.

20. A computer usable medium containing instructions in computer readable form for carrying out a process for promoting information and knowledge sharing among the users registered to a computer network, the process comprising the steps of:

15 (a) accepting a first user's request;

(b) searching a local or private knowledge object repository and all local, directly accessible knowledge objects associated with a specific user;

(c) searching a central knowledge object repository and all contributed knowledge objects associated with the users;

20 (d) returning to the first user a list of links for all matching knowledge objects, said matching knowledge objects being marked either local or published or listed;

(e) allowing access if the first user chooses a local or published knowledge object from the list; and

(f) forwarding the first user's request to a second user and prompting the second user for authorization of access if the first user chooses a listed
5 knowledge object from the list, the second user having control of access to the listed knowledge object.

21. The computer usable medium of Claim 20, wherein the first user initiates a request by any of:

entering a query; and

10 clicking a link in a directory.

22. The computer usable medium of Claim 21, wherein the first user initiates the request either anonymously or identifiably.

23. The computer usable medium of Claim 20, wherein the second user elects to be identified in the system either anonymously or identifiably.

5 24. The computer usable medium of Claim 20, wherein the step (e) further comprises the step of:

prompting the first user to enter a correct user identification.

25. The computer usable medium of Claim 20, after the step (f), further comprising the step of:

0 (g) returning to the first user the chosen listed knowledge object if the second user allows access;

(h) notifying the first user if the second user declines access to the listed knowledge object.

26. The computer usable medium of Claim 25, wherein the step (g) further comprises the step of:

5 prompting the second user to add a message for the first user.

27. The computer usable medium of Claim 15, wherein the step (g) further comprises the step of:

 prompting the second user to publish the chosen listed knowledge object.

28. The computer usable medium of Claim 20, wherein the step (f) further
10 comprises the step of:

 prompting the second user to make a suggestion if the second user thinks that the chosen listed knowledge object is irrelevant to the first user's request.

29. The computer usable medium of Claim 28, further comprising any step of:

 returning to the first user an unlisted knowledge object from the second
15 user's private domain if the second user so decides; and

 prompting the second user to make the unlisted knowledge object as listed or published.

30. The computer usable medium of Claim 29, further comprising any step of:

 tracking the number of times a user discloses a private knowledge object
20 as a listed knowledge object;

tracking the number of times a user authorizes other users' access to a listed knowledge object;

tracking the number of times a user publishes knowledge objects;

5 tracking the number of times a published knowledge object is utilized by the users other than the user who contributed the published knowledge object; and

tracking the number of times a user utilizes knowledge objects originating from other users;

10 wherein said numbers are used in determining a reward to the user for the user's involvement in knowledge sharing.